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ABSTRACT

Sixty-five organizations responded to a survey designed to gather data for use in curriculum development in organizational communication. A five-item questionnaire was used to elicit information concerning (1) competencies needed for specialists in an organizational communication center or department; (2) educational background desirable for such specialists; and (3) different functions performed by communication specialists. Results showed that the competencies of writing, media production, interpersonal effectiveness, listening, and diagnosis were considered extremely important for communication specialists. Education considered important for the specialist included a heavy emphasis on writing of all types, media production, and some business education courses. Four types of functions emerged for the communication specialist: running training and development programs, providing communication services, establishing communication projects, and offering development opportunities for department members. (FL)

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NECESSARY FUNCTIONS AND COMPETENCIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SPECIALISTS

Applied Communication Division
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CS 504 196

NECESSARY FUNCTIONS AND COMPETENCIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SPECIALISTS

Purpose of Study

With increased emphasis on "real world" applicability of education, the discipline of communication has responded by developing a career orientation designed for an organizational context. Numerous studies have been conducted to identify communication skills needed in various organizational settings. In concluding a survey of such studies, DiSalvo urges in part that future researchers should continue to identify communication skills necessary in organizations, to investigate specific groups of workers, and to expand the areas of research to include government, hospital, church, and public service organizations as well.[1] To continue in the directions he outlined, I conducted a survey to gather data for curriculum development in organizational communication. While terminology for careers in "organizational communication" remains varied and sometimes confusing, the survey was designed to clarify the content and focus needed for such a course of study.

Methods

A five item questionnaire was constructed around four categories of data: competencies needed for communication specialists in an organizational communication center or department; educational background desirable for such specialists; percentage of their time spent on various communication functions; description of their department including number of personnel, organizational location, major functions, etc. Questionnaires were mailed to the 435 organizations listed in the Corporate Communication Centers

Guide VII,[2] a listing of organizations which have a self-designated "corporate communication center," ranging from an audio-visual clearinghouse to a full-fledged training and development program.

There were sixty-six responses, a 15.1 % return rate. Of that return, sixty-four were useable and on time; some respondents, however, omitted some items. The responding organizations included large corporations, small businesses, banks, utility companies, government agencies, educational institutions, non-profit organizations church associations, institutes, and hospital associations--all having in common a "communication center." Nine of these organizations also provided the available requested training materials; eight responded with a personal letter as well. Several expressed appreciation that higher education was responsive to their needs and one even phoned long-distance to offer more assistance; only one expressed doubts about the value of the study. Overall, there was an enthusiastic response.

Results

Number of people employed in communication center

Table 1 illustrated the 64 valid responses with a median of 8.35:

Insert Table 1

here

Competencies considered important for communication specialists in communication center

Table 2 lists 14 competencies ranked ("1" as high) in order of importance:

Insert Table 2

here

To determine the correlation between number of employees in the center and ranking of competencies, an analysis of variance was conducted. The only competency to show significant correlation to number of employees was small group/conference leadership, as illustrated in Table 3:

Insert Table 3

here

Larger communication centers ranked small group/conference leadership higher than did small centers, as might well be expected. No other competency was significantly correlated to size of center.

The competencies of writing skills, media production skills, interpersonal effectiveness, effective listening, and diagnostic/analytic skills are considered extremely important for specialists in communication departments of any size.

Percentage of time expended by communication specialists on communication functions

Table 4 lists 14 functions ranked by percentage of time spent (totalling more than 100% because some respondents' totals were more or less than 100%):

Insert Table 4

here

Communication specialists surveyed identified roughly one-third of their time, on the whole, spent on media production/presentation with writing, interpersonal relations, routine information exchange, instructing/training, and listening as also comprising a significant portion of their duties.

Educational background important for communication specialist

Table 5 illustrates the responses categorized by two coders with a coder reliability rating of 90%:

Insert Table 5

here

Education considered desirable for communication specialists includes a heavy emphasis on writing skills of all types, media production skills, and some exposure to business courses. Major fields of study considerably desirable include liberal arts as well as communication.

Location and overall function of communication center

Primary functions of communication centers surveyed are very difficult to summarize. The functions seem to vary not only by number of available personnel but also by type of organization, placement within the organizational structure, relation to other communication-oriented departments within the organization, etc. Four types of functions emerged: training and development programs (i.e., sales skills, interpersonal relations training, supervisory skills), communication services provided (i.e., slide-tape programs, video productions, speeches), on-going communication projects (i.e., publicity, public relations, employee communications), and development opportunities for department members (i.e., workshops, conventions). Results of this question illustrate the diversity of communication functions within the variety of responding organizations.

Summary

The data from this survey indicate that a curriculum designed to prepare students for careers as specialists in organizational communication should provide thorough grounding in the liberal arts as well as competencies in writing, interpersonal communication, and media production with all the attendant skills necessary to accomplish those ends.

Heath[3] argues that communication skills anchored in a liberal arts tradition are the foundation for corporate advocacy, a synthesizing/persuasive function especially critical in the decade of the 1980s. Pace, arguing that human resource development is the most appropriate career direction for what has traditionally been called an "organizational communication" major, lists examples of job titles, all of which fall within the purview of human resource development:[4]

training specialist
employee relations specialist
management education specialist
employee development specialist
employee communication specialist
education and development specialist
organization development specialist
personnel development specialist
training and development specialist

People in such positions have in common a need for a body of knowledge and a set of competencies which can be provided in a well-designed communication program supplemented by other areas of study.

Regardless of the designation, a career-oriented program of study in communication should provide the kind of broad-based education with a focus on specific competencies that will assist students in filling real careers in real world situations. This survey has attempted to provide a rationale and a direction for such a curriculum.

NOTES

[1]Vincent S. DiSalvo, "A Summary of Current Research Identifying Communication Skills in Various Organizational Contexts," Communication Education, 29 (July 1980), 283-290.

[2]"Corporate Communications Centers Guide VII," Audio-Visual Communications (February 1982), 16-36.

[3]Robert L. Heath, "Corporate Advocacy: An Application of Speech Communication Perspectives and Skills—and More," Communication Education, 29 (September 1980), 370-377.

[4]R. Wayne Pace, Organizational Communication (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 4.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES PER CENTER

Number of employees in center	Number of Centers
1	********** (4)
2	********** (4)
3	********** (5)
4	********** (6)
5	***** (1)
6	********** (4)
7	********** (2)
8	********** (7)
9	***** (1)
10	********** (7)
11	********** (3)
12	********** (2)
14	***** (1)
16	********** (2)
17	***** (1)
18	********** (2)
19	***** (1)
20	***** (1)
21	***** (1)
22	***** (1)
24	***** (1)
26	********** (2)
27	***** (1)
36	***** (1)
40	***** (1)
45	***** (1)
58	***** (1)

Median 8.36 Mean 11.70 Std Dev 11.14

TABLE 2

RANKING OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

Competency	Median	Mean	Std Dev
writing skills	2.25	3.47	2.55
media production skills	3.03	3.77	2.73
interpersonal effectiveness	3.03	3.80	2.51
effective listening	4.25	4.68	2.51
diagnostic/analytic skills	4.38	5.01	2.88
managing conflict	5.55	6.42	3.22
persuasive ability advocacy	6.50	6.69	2.83
small group problem-solving skills	6.75	6.66	2.81
interviewing	7.00	7.67	3.77
instructional skills	7.80	7.01	3.44
routine information exchange	7.83	7.61	3.36
small group/conference leadership	9.08	8.25	3.48
public speaking skills	9.25	9.21	3.36
other	5.76	8.50	6.01

The category "other" elicited eight responses which listed the following competencies:

technical skills (3 times)
photography (2 times)
administration
audio-visual skills
cost reduction
planning/scheduling programs
assertiveness
word-processing
graphics
on-camera skills
self-management
overview of business management
program design/consultation skills
ability to handle multiple/diverse deadline

TABLE 3

CORRELATION OF COMPETENCIES BY SIZE OF CENTER

Competency: small group/conference leadership

	1-8 employees	9-58 employees
GT Median	13	5
LE	7	13

$^2 = 3.88$

2-tailed p = .049

TABLE 4

COMMUNICATION FUNCTIONS BY PERCENTAGE OF TIME

Function	Median	Mean	Stv Dev
media production/presentation	30.17%	39.02%	26.76
writing (reports, letters, etc.)	19.75%	22.79%	17.82
interpersonal relations	10.07%	15.46%	16.48
routine information exchange	9.93%	12.78%	12.20
instructing/training	9.83%	18.00%	20.64
listening	9.75%	13.05%	15.25
small group problem-solving	5.06%	8.76%	11.62
small group/conference leadership	5.00%	13.52%	21.96
advising	4.94%	5.74%	3.61
interviewing	4.89%	7.56%	9.04
conflict negotiation	4.77%	5.23%	5.75
persuading/ dvocacy	4.67%	4.54%	3.88
public speaking	2.33%	3.87%	3.65
other	7.50%	18.75%	16.01

The category "other" elicited four responses which listed the following functions:

administration
filing
job duties
photography
planning
producing a product
program design and consultation
30% undefined due to confusion of working day
miscellaneous

TABLE 5

DESIRABLE EDUCATION FOR COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST

Skills

Writing (32*)
- media (5)
- script (3)
- general
- technical
- letters
- copywriting
- business
- creative
- reports
- financial
- training analysis

Production
- video/editing (16)
- layout & design (9)
- film/editing (6)
- photography (6)
- audio & a/v (6)
- graphics (4)
- instructional technology (2)
- slides (2)
- lighting (2)
- art (2)
- play
- multi-media
- broadcast
- engineering
- directing
- producing
- registration
- calibration
- component operation
- post-production
- system configuration

Majors

Communication (6)
- journalism (3)
- media production (3)
- media design (2)
- film production (2)
- mass media
- speech
- video production
- TV production
- broadcast
- play production
- instructional design
- writing
- engineering

Liberal Arts (14)
- English (3)
- education/teaching (3)
- sociology
- mathematics
- science

MBA (2)
- for top management

Suggested Courses/Studies

Communication (64)
- interpersonal and human relations (14)
- instructional design/training (9)
- practical experience/internships (9)
- technical aspects (8)
- listening (6)
- speaking (4)
- theory/philosophy (2)
- journalism
- public relations

Language
- grammar/composition (4)
- outlining/organizing (2)
- researching/interviewing (2)
- spelling/proofreading (2)

Business (40)
- business management
- marketing
- law
- accounting
- finance
- copyright
- sales
- training
- economics
- human resource management
- business communication/writing

Other
- computers
- logic/analysis

*Number in parenthesis indicates the number of times this item was listed; no number indicates one mention.